

Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī (1874-1937)

Vaiṣṇava Identity in Modern Dress

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*Introduction*¹

People either loved Svāmī Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvatī² for his saintly qualities and strength of character, or hated him for his uncompromising critique of Vedantic monism, radical positivism, tantric eroticism and archaic caste structures. His principled stands on these and other issues earned him the title “lion guru”. For some he was a saint, a chaste ascetic, a prophet; for others he was a maverick, an upstart, a rebel. Son of a prestigious colonial judge, yet member of the Bengali elite; loyal to the British Crown, yet critical of colonial exploitation: he founded one of the most controversial organizations in colonial Bengal, initiated thousands of disciples from every social sphere, lectured before scholars, governors, ministers and kings, and even had followers from as far away as England, Germany and Burma. Although his movement expanded at a rapid pace, it became divided after his passing away, gradually splitting into a number of distinct sub-branches. It has nonetheless survived to this day as a minor—but rather visible—segment of contemporary Vaiṣṇavism, with hundreds of thousands of sympathizers around the world. Thus far, however, Bhaktisiddhānta’s life has received little academic attention.³

Most recent scholarship regarding Bhaktisiddhānta pertains to the development of his movement after World War II—i.e., after he had passed away. Research into his actual life and contributions, however, has been hampered by the dearth of reliable source material, by the uncommonly difficult language often employed in his writings, and by the challenges entailed in gaining access to relevant data.⁴

Certain scholars have characterized Bhaktisiddhānta as an innovative reformer who broke free from the structures of Vaiṣṇava traditionalism (Brzezinski 1996-97: 173), others have portrayed him as an otherworldly mystic who was rather removed from the socio-political and cultural currents of his time (Cakravarti 1985: 398), and yet others have considered him a type of spiritual activist who surmounted caste boundaries by declaring the primacy and power of devotion (Stewart, Clooney 2007: 181).⁵ It is the intention of this article to demonstrate that Bhaktisiddhānta was all these things and more: that these descriptions of his life and conduct furnish only a partial understanding of this multifaceted individual.

Bhaktisiddhānta was firmly committed to the development of a modern form of Vaiṣṇavism that was capable of addressing the social, cultural and existential concerns of his time; to this end, he originated a profound reformulation that both retained the fundamental elements of the tradition founded by Caitanya (1486-1534), and afforded it an appropriate contemporary dress. In this regard, it can be said that rather than choosing between the apparent polarities of Hindu traditionalism and Western modernism, Bhaktisiddhānta sought to explore the capabilities and compatibilities of both. Thus while maintaining deep dedication to the sacred medieval texts of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, he simultaneously introduced important social, spiritual and institutional innovations that placed him at loggerheads with the traditionalists, the orthodoxy and the elite. No one

could deny, however, that throughout his life he remained an independent, principled and courageous thinker.

The remaining sections of this article provide a brief overview of his life, in an attempt to comprehend the thoughts and motivations that governed his actions and enabled him to traverse the borders between mystical renunciation and pragmatic spiritual activism, between solitary ascetic practice and immersion in the massive propagation of his cause, and between traditional indigenous standards and the rationalistic standards of the West.

The following material attempts to address three basic questions: 1) What was the historical context?; 2) Who was Bhaktisiddhānta?; and 3) What were his *contributions* in terms of the social and religious structures that engaged him and shaped his Vaiṣṇava identity? We will begin with a brief look at the historical context in which Bhaktisiddhānta evolved.

Context

The rapid urbanization of Calcutta and the new economic and political order established by the British created early a new situation in Bengal. This new order begun in June 1757 with the battle of Plassey, which brought to an end centuries of Islamic rule. The scientific and technological superiority of the British, the rationalism of European modernity, and the new input of the influential Christian missions, posed a formidable challenge to indigenous values and religion that no intellectual could possibly ignore. A new educated class grew in that colonial milieu, the *bhadraloka* (literally “gentle or respectable people”). The term “*bhadraloka*” has at times been translated as “middle class”, but this is quite problematic. The basis of its prosperity was neither trade nor industry as in Europe. Rather its influence was derived from a mediating role between the indigenous population and the economic, cultural and administrative interests of the colonial rulers. Their identity was associated with their intellectual rather than manual professions. (Chatterji 1994 : 4; Sarkar 1973: 509). Another specific quality was that the *bhadraloka* belonged generally to the three higher castes, “Brahman, Kayastha and Baidya” (Bandyopadhyaya 2004: 155).

This new class felt soon that the orthodox *brāhmaṇa* class, the natural repository of Hindu authority, was not capable of providing an adequate response to the challenges of European modernity, and was becoming obsolete. While the British were eager to introduce English and British education to train a class of government officers, Hindus were as fervent to learn in order to access the coveted government services. The Hindu reformers and revivalist of the ensuing Bengali renaissance were lawyers, judges, landlords, teachers and employees in the colonial administration. The *bhadraloka* of Calcutta provided a fertile ground for the growth of a new class of Hindu laymen and laywomen, who claimed authority by dint of their influence, learning, and merit. They began slowly to challenge indigenous Hindu customs like early marriage, and create new reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj (Zavos 2000: 44).⁶

The period between 1870 and 1940 saw tremendous political, social and cultural ferment on an unprecedented, global scale (Daunton, Rieger 2001: 3). This is important to keep in mind in order to explain central aspects of Bhaktisiddhānta’s life, especially his allegiance to a renewal of Vaiṣṇavism. During this period, the concept of “modernity” grew in British culture conveying a vast range of meaning from a breach from the past to a promise of endless progress (Daunton, Rieger 2001: 2-3.).⁷ The end of the 19th century marked the fading of the Bengali “renaissance”, born of the encounter between Hindu and European culture. It was replaced by anti-imperialist ideologies and the movement for Indian independence. The early 20th century saw the gradual disintegration of the world

order as World War I and its by-products shook to the core the global trade and political balance of the 19th century, a century dominated by the Empire and industrial revolution of Britain (Polanyi 2001: 32). Waves of political and economic instability followed World War I as the belligerent nations tried to recover their economies, and establish a new political order. Their inability to do so, especially in regard to the unilateral disarmament and economic compensations imposed on Germany, created the ground for the rise of Nazism, which would soon become the most formidable challenge to British supremacy. These powerful events in Europe had a profound impact in India as well. Social, political and economic upheavals shook severely the traditional basis of religion in rural and urban Bengal (Chakravarti 2002: 270).

Silenced by this turmoil, Vaiṣṇavism faced a period of decreased influence among the *bhadraloka* in Bengal. This decay was also accelerated by a new search for a pan-Hindu identity that would overcome sectarian views, and allow Hindus to face united the new challenges of religious communalism and anti-imperialism. The intense search for a pan-Hindu ideology favoured ultimately monism, an abstract conception of the Divine beyond form and individuality, which became immensely popular with the intelligentsia (King 1999: 134). It was an idealistic religion, impersonal, which subordinated popular icon worship in Vaiṣṇava and Śākta temples to a formless ultimate reality, opposing many aspects of Hindu popular religion. It was inspired by Śankara's (700 CE) Vedānta, although reinterpreted with a stark social and political orientation. Svāmī Vivekananda popularized one important version of monistic Vedānta in Chicago at the World Conference of Religions in 1893, and upon his return to India, it quickly swept Bengal. Vaiṣṇava intellectuals, who favoured the deeply personalistic and devotional approach of Caitanya, resisted, unable, however, to compete in popularity and impact.

Parallel to the monistic turn, however, a neo-Vaiṣṇava movement emerged, heralded by Sisir Kumar Ghosh (1840-1911) and his brothers. Their patriotic English newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika* kept Vaiṣṇavism alive in the minds of the *bhadraloka*. The wealthy Marwari community and other staunch Vaiṣṇavas like the Mahārājas of Kasimbazar and Tripura patronized generously monasteries, festivals and the mass printing of literature. Reformers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) reintroduced Caitanya and Vaiṣṇava singing, *kirtan*, to the *bhadraloka*. Revolutionaries like Krishna Chandra Pal (1858-1932) wrote in defence of the Vaiṣṇava deity of Kṛṣṇa against the accusation of debauchery by Christian missionaries (Pal 2002). The father of Bhaktisiddhānta played a significant role and created the first organized Vaiṣṇava movement in Bengal (Chakravarti 2002: 272).

Critique against Vaiṣṇavism, however, had mounted. Its reputation had been compromised in the eyes of puritan Christian and Victorian sensibilities by the tantric sexual practices of the *sahajas*, an ancient school that had become associated with Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal in the seventeenth century and onwards (Manring 2005: 4; Majumdar 1978: 231). Since most Vaiṣṇavas in Bengal belonged to the lower strata of society, Vaiṣṇavism was associated with noisy beggars and opportunists, and was an object of public ridicule (Chakravarti 1985: 439).⁸ Moreover, the centres of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal were slowly dwindling, and even Navadvīpa, the birthplace of Caitanya, was losing its reputation as a centre of learning, despite good numbers of Vaiṣṇava ascetics and savants.

What follows is a biographical sketch of Bhaktisiddhānta. It is divided for convenience into three periods, each marking an important developmental stage: 1) 1874-1900, the period of formative education; 2) 1900-1918, the turn to asceticism; 3) 1918-1937, the shaping of a Vaiṣṇava movement.

Early Period: 1874-1900⁹

Jagannātha Purī is one of the most sacred sites of Vaiṣṇavism, a city on the southern shore of the Bay of Bengal in the Indian state of Orissa. Here, at 3:30 PM on Friday, February 6, 1874 Bhaktisiddhānta was born in his family home, a house built on Purī's main road called "the Grand Road". The building was lined just a few hundred meters from the large Hindu temple of Jagannātha, who Vaiṣṇavas view as a Deity of Kṛṣṇa.¹⁰ The large temple is also one of the most important shrines for the Caitanya tradition, augmented by the fact that Caitanya spent just nearby the last portion of his life.¹¹ Bhaktisiddhānta was the seventh child of Kedarnath Datta (1834-1914), known in Vaiṣṇava circles as Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura, and his wife, Bhāgavatī Devī, both devoted Vaiṣṇavas.¹² Bhaktivinoda worked at the time as a district judge and studied Vaiṣṇava literature.¹³ He named his son "Bimala Prasada", the grace of the female personification of the potency of Jagannātha, according to Vaiṣṇava theology. "Bimala Prasada", "Datta" and "Bhaktisiddhānta" will indicate hereafter the same person at different stages of his life.

Bhaktivinoda was appointed later senior Deputy Magistrate in Serampore, an ex-Danish colony and renowned seat of early Baptist mission. He registered Bimala Prasada at the local school in 1883. When he was a seventh-grade student, Bhaktivinoda initiated him in the Caitanya school by "*harināma*" ("the name of Hari", another name of Kṛṣṇa). This initiation into the recitation of sacred sound is generally preformed by a *brāhmaṇa* guru within a line of succession (*sampradāya*). Bhaktivinoda was neither a *brāhmaṇa* nor formally initiated at the time, but he wished that his son developed an affinity for Vaiṣṇavism.

Bhaktivinoda established the revivalist *Viśva Vaiṣṇava Rāja Sabhā* (the Royal World Vaiṣṇava Association) in 1885. Vaiṣṇavas like Bipin Bihari Gosvami, who later gave formal initiation to Bhaktivinoda, and the publisher Sisir Kumar Ghosh attended its meetings and were involved in developing it. The association stimulated Bimala Prasada's intellectual growth and made him acquainted with the cultural and religious life of Bengal. Bimala embarked now in a comprehensive study of classical and contemporary Vaiṣṇava literature under his father's supervision.

In 1885, Bhaktivinoda founded the *Vaisnava Depository*, a press built in his house, and in 1886 he started publishing the *Sajjana-toṣaṇī*, a monthly magazine in Bengali where he published his own articles on Vaiṣṇava history and philosophy, reviews of books, poetry and novels. The young Bimala Prasada was soon given the task of proofreading the magazine. From these early years, he learned to appreciate the power of the press for dealing with the sophisticated, Hindu *bhadrāloka*. This training became particularly useful later on, as Bhaktisiddhānta embarked on his own publishing.

Bhaktisiddhānta summarizes his early education:¹⁴

I entered the Serampore Union School as a student in the month of October 1883, the year when the Calcutta exhibition was held. I left Serampore school in 1887, the jubilee year of Victorian rule, and joined the Calcutta Metropolitan Institution. In 1892 I left the Sanskrit College without completing my courses (Bhaktisiddhānta 1999: vol. 3, p. 48)

Calcutta Metropolitan Institution had been founded by the Sanskritist and educator Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) in 1864, and provided a solid education for the *bhadrāloka* youth. Vidyasagar had been earlier elected as the principle of the Sanskrit college in 1851 and had reformed it to allow *kayasthas* like Datta to attend the college alongside *brāhmaṇas* and *vaidyas*. The young Bimala Prasada chose the prestigious Sanskrit

College for advanced studies in Sanskrit, mathematics, Indian philosophy and ancient history, and passed the entrance examination. He discontinued his studies, however, shortly after. The reason was a dispute around the precise calculation of the equinox, which was necessary to determine the Bengali calendar. Bimala Prasada openly opposed the theory of the principle Mahesa Chandra Nyayaratna, and a conflict ensued. He chose at that point to leave the college (Sambidananda 1935: ch. 13, p. 33).

In 1891, at the age of 17, Bimala Prasada Datta had started his own school of astronomy, the Sarasvata Catuṣpati, at his father's house near Ram Bagan in Calcutta. He had subsequently attracted a respectable number of students. The school published books and articles on astronomy, and he prepared his students for examinations at the Sanskrit College. His disputes, nonetheless, did not end. In 1898 he had a new series of debates with the chair of astronomy regarding theories developed by him that his students presented at the College. Datta closed the astronomy school sometime in 1901 or 1902. During this period he displayed traits that became embedded in his personality later on: courage, intellectual integrity, and a taste for debate.

Meanwhile, in 1895 Datta accepted a service by the Mahārāja of Tripura, a good friend of Bhaktivinoda. This made him economically independent from his father, and allowed him to pursue his personal interests. Tripura (or Hill Tippera) was located between Eastern Bengal and Assam, one of India's easternmost provinces. It bordered with the British district of Tippera, and was a princely state under the protectorate of the British crown.¹⁵ The princely state had been ruled for a long time by the Mahārājas of the Manikya dynasty, who possessed a vast estate in Tippera, and a fine residence in the capital Agartala. While supervising the astronomy school in Calcutta and entrusting tuition to his senior students, Datta was employed first by Mahārāja Bir Chandra Kishore (1837-1896) for compiling the biographies of the royal line. After Bir Chandra passed away in 1896, his son, Radha Kishore (1857-1909) requested Datta to tutor his princes. Gradually, however, Datta was appointed to the Calcutta Agency of the Tripura state, and had the chance to meet the top administrators of Bengal. He wrote that "in 1895 I accepted a service in the independent state of Tripura and in 1905 a full pension was granted to me. I accepted it till the year 1908" (Bhaktisiddhānta 1999: 3.48)

The period at the end of the 19th century, and the first years of the 20th century marked a period of intense exploration into new avenues of religious experience. Datta had received a modern education through public and private tutors, besides conducting traditional studies in Sanskrit and astronomy. He had combined it with his own intensive readings of Vaiṣṇava texts, and private discussions with the intellectual elite of his time. He had developed the skill of debating through an association of students that he had founded, the August society, whose members vowed life-long celibacy. His work as an intellectual and teacher was attuned with his acute and penetrating mind, and he was eager to participate in the culture of his time. Nevertheless at the turn of the century Datta began to feel fatigued by the challenges of social life. He had always possessed a passion for asceticism and now he felt more and more inclined to renounce the comfort of the *bhadrāloka* household and look for an ascetic tutor. Bhaktivinoda had already many disciples but they were more often than not married. A Vaiṣṇava ascetic, Gaura Kiśora, began to visit Bhaktivinoda from time to time to listen to his lectures. Datta met him and was deeply touched. Within a few months he accepted him as guru. He writes:

It was by providential dispensation that I was able fully to understand the language and practical side of devotion after I had met the practising master...No education could have prepared me for the good fortune of understanding my master's attitude...Before I met him my impression was that

the writings of the devotional school could not be fully realised in a practical life in this world. My study of my master, and then the study of the books, along with the explanations by Thakura Bhakti Vinoda, gave me ample facility to advance towards the true spiritual life. Before I met my master, I had not written anything about real religion. Up to that time, my idea of religion was confined to books and to a strict ethical life, but that sort of life was found imperfect unless I came in touch with the practical side of things (Sambidananda 1935: 13.41).

Just prior to this turn of events, in the year 1900, Datta composed *Baṅge Sāmājikatā* (*The Structure of Society in Bengal*), a book that marks his first analysis of the complex relation between religion and society. It presents his research and ideas at the turn of the century. The book can be viewed as an indirect response to three major accusations launched by the colonial European elite against Hinduism: 1) it lacked a sense of history; 2) it lacked a moral system; and 3) it was irrational and lacked a coherent philosophical system (Basu 2002: 45). Datta embarks in a historical account of Bengal, based on indigenous and European perspectives. He analyzes Hindu society as a community united by affinities and common interests, but segmented by hierarchies of professions and caste. In the last chapter he explores “religion” (*dharma*) in India, and summarizes its history from the early Vedic beginnings till contemporary schools of thought. The section contains a review of over 60 religious movements in Bengal. From a Vaiṣṇava perspective, the book amounts to a defence of the personal self against the backdrop of a monistic worldview, which views ontological personhood as a mere construction. A defence of the ontological nature of the person, the inner self beyond the physical body and the psychic mind of European philosophy, was necessary in order to justify the relation between an infinite Divine person and the personal self, without which a reciprocal relationship of *bhakti*, or devotional love, was ultimately pointless.

He ends the book with a note pointing towards Caitanya and his teachings. Echoing the quest of the *bhadraloka* for a sense of lost purity, he suggests that Divine love alone can heal the human heart from the burden of greed, and help overcoming social conflicts. If only humans abandon their real or imagined castes, the Supreme Person would endorse one “universal caste” open to all, he suggests. The last words consist of a verse allegedly spoken by Caitanya:

I am neither a *brāhmaṇa* nor a king of men, neither a *vaiśya* nor a *sūdra*, neither a *brahmācārya* nor a *gṛhastha*, neither a *vanaprastha* nor a *saṁnyāsin*, but I am a lowly servant of a servant of the lotus feet of the lord of the *gopīs*, who is a sea of nectar filled with the pure and highest joy made manifest (Bhaktisiddhānta 2002: 66).¹⁶

Datta points to the possibility of shaping a Vaiṣṇava identity based on a universal principle of service and brotherhood beyond caste. This means, in an extended sense, to go beyond national identity, gender and race. The idea was certainly not new. It had been formulated by Bhaktivinoda in his writings and echoed deeply the intellectual and social perspective of the Caitanya tradition. The question was how this could be translated in 20th century Bengal.

Middle Period: 1900-1918

Sumit Sarkar has suggested that besides being torn by the major ideological debate between indigenous revivalism and modernity, the Indian intelligentsia was searching for an identity amidst “a maze of alternative loyalties—Bengali, Hindu (or Muslim), Indian” (1973: 494). Datta’s self consciousness as a Vaiṣṇava, however, pushed him beyond such alternatives. Since the days of the Sanskrit College, he had been torn between the option of

becoming a successful, well-paid teacher or an ascetic. The meeting with his guru was a turning experience. He would pay later on his homage to Gaura Kiśora at the beginning of his commentary on the Sanskrit classic *Śrīmad Bhagavatam* with the words “my master” (*mama prabhuḥ*) (1984: 3). By the turn of the century, Datta decided to dedicate himself exclusively to the cultivation of Vaiṣṇava devotion (*bhakti*):

In 1901 I was initiated by my guru...I went to Puri. From that time on I developed a strong connection with Puri and I spent a full year there during the year 1904. From Puri I set out to travel to South India, from the end of 1904 till January 1905. From that point I began to live in Māyāpura and I visited Puri from time to time. In Māyāpura, from 1905 onwards I began to present Caitanya’s teachings. In 1906 Rohini Kumara Ghosh became my first initiated disciple (Bhaktisiddhānta 1999: 3.48-49).

Bhaktisiddhānta began an intense practice of meditation on sound (*mantra*). He would throughout his life consider the recitation of sacred names the main hub around which the devotional practices of the followers of Caitanya were bound to circle (Valpey 2006: 101). Rohini Kumara Ghosh was the nephew of Justice Chandra Madhava Ghosh, and the first of many educated young Bengalis, who came to him for studying Vaiṣṇava philosophy and practice. In Puri and Māyāpura, Datta lived simply and filled his time with devotional readings and profound meditation. Travels to South India gave him the opportunity to explore the breadth and depth of Hinduism. At this time, Bhaktivinoda added the word “*bhakti*” to “Siddhānta Sarasvatī”, a title that he had received while studying astronomy. It was a reward for his proficiency in Vaiṣṇava philosophy (Sambidananda 1935: 13.41).

Bhaktisiddhānta left behind the enflamed life of Calcutta ravaged by the *Swadeshi* movement organized by the *bhadraloka*. It was a boycott movement that fought against the partition of Bengal orchestrated by Lord Curzon in 1905. Confrontations between the *bhadraloka* and the colonial rulers lasted till 1912, and involved public protests and several acts of violence (Sarkar 1973: 465-92).

Bhaktisiddhānta faced a Hindu society torn by political unrest and in which the traditional authority of the *brāhmaṇas* was more often than not unquestioned, particularly in rural areas. Echoing a longing for social mobility by the progressive sections of the *bhadraloka*, he wished to see that caste and social status be ascertained according to personal merit and qualities, not birth and nepotism. This was also a necessity in order to legitimize his own right to be a religious leader and guru in view of the fact that he was born in a “lower” *kayastha* family.

In August 1911, a large meeting was arranged in Balighai Uddhavapura, in the Midnapura district, to discuss whether a non-*brāhmaṇa* Vaiṣṇava could give initiation to caste *brāhmaṇas*. Many orthodox groups attended. Bhaktisiddhānta was invited and presented a paper, “*Brāhmaṇa and Vaiṣṇava*” (*Brāhmaṇa o Vaiṣṇava*), which he later published in an extended version (Bhaktisiddhānta 2000). He argued for the superior position of the Vaiṣṇava based on aptitude, practice, effort and qualification against the claims to the contrary by hereditary *brāhmaṇas*. He presented extended evidence in Sanskrit from Hindu and Vaiṣṇava texts, which was an improvement in *bhadraloka* communication with the orthodox, for whom Sanskrit was the language of authority. He proposed an important distinction between *Daiva* (Divine) *Varnaśrama*,¹⁷ based on performance and merit, and hereditary *Varnaśrama* based on blood lineages, which he named *asura* (ungodly). The meeting signalled the beginning of a long dispute over tradition and authority in the Navadvīpa area, which lasted throughout Bhaktisiddhānta’s life. The conflict increased as he set to develop a new Vaiṣṇava community in Māyāpura,

on the other side of the Ganges, according to the principles of merit. He signalled **that** by delivering *brāhmaṇa* initiation to any man or woman whom **he** found qualified.

According to Sambidananda (1935), this move created difficulties for his disciples, since they acquired a new identity as Vaiṣṇavas through initiation in the disciplic line, but in most cases had to deal with orthodox (*smārta*) caste rules as soon as they wished to marry. Marriage **meant often for males leaving** the shelter of the ascetic community and returning to mainstream society. Inter-caste marriage was therefore uncommon and Bhaktisiddhānta chose to be lenient. He writes:

I do not know what would be the situation if members of the devotional society (*bhagavatas*) form a separate class. In my opinion, their separate identity may be maintained while keeping their previous *varṇa*, or if they are genuine and courageous in their conviction they may free themselves from the shackles of a misdirected caste society. All these opinions and their practical applications are entirely individual and should be made according to circumstance and need. Those who **believe** in *smārta* theories cannot properly relate to those who subscribe to the Vaishnava view... Determination of what should be the *varṇa* of a particular individual is the essence of the divine (*daiva*) *varṇāśrama*, and its aim is not to mix one's familial identity with one's personal nature. (Bhaktisiddhānta 1999: 3.50).

Bhaktisiddhānta acknowledges that he had to make some adjustments due to social pressure. In the same letter, he writes that it was never his intention to start a social reform movement. His motive was to strengthen the Vaiṣṇava community, but he found that the orthodox were creating too many obstacles, and therefore he saw himself forced to fight against them. For him, however, **Vaṇāśrama** and its regulated rituals (*samśkāras*) are beneficial for spiritual health, but in their present shape they have become corrupted. He states that he does not wish to interfere with the practices of the *smārtas*, but strive to create a new social space that can allow mobility and reward according to merit. In acknowledging the potential of **varṇāśrama** in Vaiṣṇavism, he aligned himself indirectly with the socio-religious vision of Gandhi.

In 1913, Sarasvatī established a press in Calcutta and began publishing medieval Vaiṣṇava texts in Bengali such as the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja with his own commentary. The development of the press marked his commitment to an urban approach to religion, based on a greater reliance on printed texts. In this sense, Bhaktisiddhānta expanded the concept of Bhaktivinoda, whose press he had contributed to as proof reader, writer, and assistant.

On June 23, 1914, Bhaktivinoda passed away. Not long after that Bhaktisiddhānta moved the press first to Māyāpura and then to nearby Krishnanagara. He continued publishing Bhaktivinoda's *Sajjana-toṣaṇī*, at the time one of Bengal's widely read Vaiṣṇava magazines. In June 1915, he completed his own commentary on the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*; and a short while later, on November 17, 1915, Gaura Kīśora also passed away. Thus within the span of a little more than a year Bhaktisiddhānta had lost both his father and his **guru**—his two greatest sources of guidance and inspiration. Naturally, these losses were devastating and keenly felt (Sambidananda 1935: 13.51). The majority of **Ba**ktivinoda's disciples were preoccupied with their own married lives and thus unable to provide significant assistance, be it in publishing or organizing a movement. One of his own disciples, Kunjabihari Vidyabhushana (later Svāmī Bhakti Vilāsa Tirtha), suggested that Bhaktisiddhānta relocate to Calcutta to establish a centre there. Inspired by the idea, he planned for an *āśrama* (or school) to train disciples, took courage, and prepared to depart.

Late Period: 1918-1937

Before his return to Calcutta, however, Bhaktisiddhānta made an important decision that would decidedly influence the course of his own destiny, and that of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism's as well: the decision to become a *sannyāsa*, and, by so doing, enter Hinduism's most prestigious monastic order (Vidyāvinoda 2003: 10-11). After the departures of Bhaktivinoda and Gaura Kiśora, Bhaktisiddhānta had become deeply undecided as to which was the best direction for his future. The decision to take *sannyāsa*, and the manner in which he took it, constituted a resolution of his dilemma, and an important step forward in the revitalization of the Caitanya tradition: sitting down before a picture of his guru, he controversially invested the order upon himself, and from that day on undeviatingly adopted both the dress and the self-styled life of a Vaiṣṇava renunciate.

Prior to this act, whereas well-established lineages such as Śaṅkara's had included the order of *sannyāsa*, the Caitanya tradition had not. However, in the view of Bhaktisiddhānta, who had already visited a number of religious institutions in India, times appeared propitious for such a move. After all, Christian missionaries had for a long time proven that monastic institutions could be socially respectable and very productive as well (Beckerlegge 2001: 148). Apart from this, there was at least some precedent in the Caitanya tradition for the inclusion of a monastic order. Caitanya himself had accepted the order of *sannyāsa*, primarily as a means of obtaining public respect and authority for his mission—although he never took the step of conferring *sannyāsa* upon others. This was also the case among a number of his more prominent disciples, the majority of whom preferred to rely upon the less prestigious ascetic forms of “*gosvāmī*” and “*bābāji*”. In Bhaktisiddhānta's time, however, these two forms had changed, leaving the “*gosvāmīs*” a class of married men and women and the “*bābājis*” under clouds of suspicion as a result of their alleged licentiousness. The moral status of Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal was in dire need of repair, and Bhaktisiddhānta had lived as a celibate throughout the entirety of his life. For him, this fact, in and of itself, constituted enough merit to warrant his acceptance of *sannyāsa*, which immediately endowed his budding movement, not only with a new look, but with a strong ethical profile as well. The glowing saffron vestments of a *svāmī* traditionally signalled to those who encountered him his intention to be a simple, chaste and upright individual selflessly involved in the spiritual upliftment of society. In this manner Bhaktisiddhānta created the modern image of the engaged Vaisnava renunciate in Bengal. This watershed in his spiritual career marked the beginning of his most productive and successful period, which saw the rapid flowering of his institution from a humble centre in Calcutta to 64 dynamic temples and centres of devotional practice in India, Burma, London and Berlin.

On February 5, 1919, Bhaktisiddhānta revived Bhaktivinoda's society, the *Viśva Vaiṣṇava Rāja Sābhā*. Considering his movement to be fundamentally rooted in his father's work, he merely installed himself as the society's new president and began the work of propagating his mission under its banner. Eventually, however, his movement came to be known as the “*Gauḍīya Maṭh*”, an appellation taken from the names of his Calcutta branch and the weekly Bengali magazine *Gauḍīya* (Sambidananda 1935: 13.60). The latter would become one of the prominent Vaiṣṇava periodicals of its time, and one of the main instruments for disseminating Bhaktisiddhānta's ideas.

The 1920's saw a period of intense activity. In 1923, Bhaktisiddhānta began to print the *Śrīmād Bhagavatam* or *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, which included his own Bengali commentaries. He then edited and commented upon the *Caitanya Bhāgavata*, an important Caitanya

hagiography in Bengali by Vṛndāvana Dāsa Ṭhākura, published in Dacca in 1924. On December 16, 1924, he lectured at Benares Hindu University on “The Place of Vaiṣṇavism in World Religion”. During this period he increasingly viewed his own movement as part of the history and development of Vaiṣṇavism in Southern and Northern India. He subsequently began to publish books of other Vaiṣṇava lines, and encourage devotional veneration for medieval Vaiṣṇavas like Mādhva, Rāmanuja, Nimbarka and Viṣṇu Svāmī.

On January 29, 1925, at the start of a one month tour of various sacred places in Navadvīpa, a new confrontation erupted between Bhaktisiddhānta and members of the orthodox religious community. Prior to this day, animosity towards Bhaktisiddhānta had been on the rising because he had spoken out against caste *brahmanas* who were charging pilgrims for entering their temples, and also because he had reduced the exclusive importance of Navadvīpa by developing Māyāpura—the alternate pilgrimage site on the other side of the Ganges. As Bhaktisiddhānta and his rather large gathering of pilgrims were walking through the streets, they were suddenly attacked by an angry mob of locals and pelted with broken bricks and other harmful projectiles. Fortunately, with the exception of a few minor injuries, the procession party escaped unscathed and continued on with their tour. In subsequent years, however, a police escort was assigned to accompany the procession as it passed through the city (Sambidananda 1935: 13.73). Navadvīpa’s community of hereditary gurus remained among the most formidable of Bhaktisiddhānta’s opponents, and it was they who mounted the most sustained challenge to his ideas and reforms.

The Gauḍīya Maṭh continued to increase its reputation as an outspoken institution through its various publications, which included a daily newspaper (*Naḍīya Prakāśha*), a weekly magazine in Bengali (*Gauṇīya*), a monthly magazine in English and Sanskrit (*The Harmonist or Sree Sajjanatoshani*) as well as a number of smaller magazines targeted towards audiences in different parts of India—i.e., magazines in Assamese (*Kirtan*), Oriya (*Paramārthi*, fortnightly) and Hindi (*Bhagavata*, fortnightly).

It was, however, in urban areas like Calcutta that his movement grew most rapidly. In such places, wealthy patrons volunteered profuse donations for the construction of temples and the development of exhibitions. Disciples, on the other hand, came from both urban and rural areas. While the constituency of the movement was mixed, the leadership came from the educated elite. The core of his movement was comprised of approximately twenty well educated *sannyāsis* that were dispatched to various locations in India and Europe. His supporters, however, were laymen and laywomen who provided the institution with funds and a large number of services. Gauḍīya Maṭh temples served the needs of a modern urban laity, and the practice of devotional love (*bhakti*) was rationalized and simplified to meet the acute demands of modern life, especially by emphasizing private (*japa*) and public (*kirtan*) forms of meditation on the names of the Vaiṣṇava Deities.

Bhaktisiddhānta saw the “secular” and “spiritual” spheres as linked, as long as the goal of their union was spiritual upliftment. This approach inspired him to explore new ways of awakening an interest in the process of Divine love (*bhakti*), and this at a time when the independence movement and communalist tensions between Hindus and Muslims dominated the news. In his attempts to reach mainstream Vaiṣṇava and Hindu culture, he did not hesitate to employ technical devices, the symbol of European modernity and its ideal of progress. This vision crystallized as a series of “theistic” exhibitions.

In one instance, an exhibition was organized in cooperation with the government of Bengal, and was held in Māyāpura near the premises of the Gauḍīya Maṭh. Sambidananda

writes that the exhibition was divided into two sections, one “secular” and one “spiritual”. The secular section included departments like “medical, educational, agricultural, arts and crafts; cattle and livestock; child welfare; athletics, amusement and so on” (1935: 13.80). The spiritual section included: 1) a museum with sacred items collected all over India; 2) a display of books printed by religious groups from all parts of India; rare unpublished manuscripts; 3) photos and paintings of eminent saints and sacred places with their shrines; 4) a large stone map of India that showed the pilgrimage routes of Caitanya and much more; and, 5) more than 50 stalls that showed the practices of religion in India. The religious stalls had life-size dioramas and painted backdrops. The ground was illuminated with electricity that had been drawn in Māyāpura for the first time. Bhaktisiddhānta would often invite scientists and scholars to preside at the programs during the exhibitions (*ibid.*).

On December 23, 1932, Mahatma Gandhi planned a meeting with the orthodox Hindu organization Shastri Parishad. Gandhi posed ten questions regarding both untouchability and its relation to sacred texts (*shastras*). A few days later, those questions were published in the *Hindustan Times* as follows:

1. Define untouchability according to Shastras.
 2. Can the definition of untouchables given in the Shastras be applied to the so-called untouchables of the present day?
 3. What are the restrictions imposed by Shastras on the untouchables?
 4. Can an individual be free from untouchability in his own lifetime?
 5. What are the injunctions of the Shastras regarding behaviour of the touchables with the untouchables?
 6. Under what circumstances will the Shastras permit temple entry by the untouchables?
 7. What are Shastras?
 8. How is authoritativeness of the Shastras proved?
 9. How will the differences arising over the definitions or interpretations of Shastras be decided?
 10. What are your conclusions?
- (Gandhi 1999, vol. 52: 268-269)

Bhaktisiddhānta wrote a prompt reply that appeared in the *The Harmonist* on January 1933, and was called “Gandiji’s ten questions” (1933: 203-209, 30.7). In the article Bhaktisiddhānta defines untouchables as those who are inimical to the concept of serving God. The temples of Viṣṇu should be open to all, he maintains, but more specifically to those who possess a favourable attitude towards the Divine, and are willing to undergo a process of spiritual growth. On the other hand, this stance does not imply a prohibition to interact with those who are hostile in the course of ordinary, secular transactions “nor does it imply that any person is to be looked down upon or disrespected” (p. 203). It refers primarily to avoiding intimate association, i.e. giving and accepting gifts, receiving and offering food, as well as hearing and disclosing personal, private matters. He states that untouchability is a phenomenon that has occurred in Hindu society for cultural and historical reasons. The problem of the untouchables is therefore a national issue, not a religious one. He maintains that Hinduism is essentially a secular concept that tries to accommodate secular issues within the sanction of religious law. Bhaktisiddhānta suggests as an alternative an ethics of “unconditional reverence for all entities by the realization and exclusive practice of the whole-time service of the Absolute” (p. 205). The practice of Divine love and service to the Supreme Person implies moral responsibility towards all other persons, who are ontologically, according to Caitanya doctrine, minute and equal parts of the Divine.

Nonetheless, Bhaktisiddhānta never linked his perspective on ethics to the systematic improvement of material condition, which was an important aspect of Hindu nationalist consciousness. This type of approach held “promotion of material welfare of fellow beings as of equal importance as their spiritual ministration” (Cakravarty 1992: 227). Neither did he subscribe to another strand of nationalist consciousness: a symbiosis of national cultural revival with liberal legacies of western education (Cakravarty 1992: 226). He chalked another path that was beyond immediate nationalist discourse, but which included implicitly an indigenous cultural and religious revival, the purification of the nation through asceticism, and a recovery of a lost spiritual heritage, albeit within the frame of a simultaneously modern and traditional Vaiṣṇava identity.

To shield against radical individualism, Bhaktisiddhānta suggests at the end of the article that the traditional method of hearing from a realized guru is the way to connect the self, the *person*, with transcendence. The guru is the living proof of the truth of the sacred texts, embodying both revelation and tradition. Anticipating the question of how to find the “true” guru, however, he acknowledges that it is rather difficult.

Bhaktisiddhānta saw education as a path to empowerment and insight, as well as a way to enter a dialogue with mainstream society, and he encouraged it. On April 3, 1931, he inaugurated a school in Māyāpura, the Bhaktivinoda Institute. The school had government support and was officially linked to Calcutta University, where qualified students took admission examinations. The purpose of the school was to provide a secular education in a religious environment, and all teachers were affiliated with the Gauḍīya Maṭh. The school had at its peak 700 students (Sambidananda 1935: 13.84).

Gender is a fundamental trait of Caitanyaite mysticism. In an article called “Sree Radhika” (“Radhika” is equivalent to “Rādhā”), he writes that “the Absolute Nature of the Personality of Radhika is fully on a level with the Absolute Personality of Sree Krishna. Sree Krishna is the Consort of Sree Radhika. The Absolute is Pair and not a Singular Person” (*The Harmonist* 1935: 138, 30.5). He opposed, however, erotic portraits of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, as well as erotic descriptions in songs. According to Sambidananda, his response to the erotic practices in the Caitanya tradition was that they were caused by insufficient philosophical understanding (Sambidananda 1935: 13.98). He identified himself internally as a maidservant of Rādhā, and maintained that the practice of meditation on sacred sound alone was sufficient to grant the intimate service of the Divine couple. The path to a “pure” identity was not indulgence in erotic meditation and practice, but chastity, humility and service. While firmly condemning external sensuality and the dangers of loose relations between men and women, he praised femininity as a divine principle, equal if not more powerful than masculinity. His idea of femininity, however, did not involve a process of social emancipation. Rather, his attempt was to change the way femininity was understood, and establish the female principle as a partner to the male. Furthermore, Vaiṣṇavism was perceived by many as effeminate, and Bhaktisiddhānta by his example drew a line between effeminism and femininity. The new, modern Vaiṣṇava was to be externally masculine, firm and bold, while internally tempered by “feminine” qualities like humility and loving devotion.

Bhaktisiddhānta had many female disciples. Educated women contributed to the Gauḍīya Maṭh with writings and poetry. Most, however, lived at home with their families, and assisted the movement in menial capacities. The Gauḍīya Maṭh did not offer better opportunities to women, and they were never organized, perhaps also due to the patriarchal fibre of Bengal society (Sambidananda 1935: 13.94).

Many critical voices rose against Bhaktisiddhānta and the Gauḍīya Maṭh, besides those from caste *brāhmaṇas* and their sympathizers. Bhaktisiddhānta maintained a close focus on the spiritual growth of the person, and the growth of a modern Vaiṣṇava movement in all its practical implications. That was bound to be necessarily far less popular than the humanitarian approach of Vivekananda. Protests raised among the *bhadraloka* on one occasion as Bhaktisiddhānta refused to use funds meant for a theistic exhibition for famine relief.¹⁸ Bhaktisiddhānta had to defend his stance through his periodicals, and he did not bend to popular demands. He maintained that there was no lack of material resources to relieve the problems of humanity. The only lack was Divine love, which resulted in man-made scarcity.

The end of the 1920's and the beginning of the 1930's witnessed a new phase. India was still at the periphery of the Empire and England at the centre. Bhaktisiddhānta wished to create a bridge between India and the West, which he viewed as irreversibly linked. Perhaps he felt that this might empower his work in India, which was facing severe obstacles. From 1927 onwards he began to print in English periodicals like *The Harmonist* or *Sree Sajjanatoshani* and other literature. The British were asked to patronize the movement in a spirit of friendship and reciprocal respect, and they extended their help. Bhaktisiddhānta sent disciples to London, and they visited also Germany and other European countries, lecturing at a number of universities. On April 24, 1934, Lord Zetland, the British secretary of state of India, inaugurated the Gauḍīya Mission Society in London (Bon 1934). A few months later a centre was established in Berlin (Bon 1935). In India, on January 15, 1935, Sir John Anderson, the Governor of Bengal, came to Māyāpura to meet Bhaktisiddhānta and visit the Gauḍīya Maṭh. On September 18, 1935, the Gauḍīya Maṭh, along with distinguished citizens of Calcutta, offered a reception to two German sympathizers, Ernst George Schulze and H. E. von Queth, who arrived to Calcutta along with Svāmī Bhakti Hr̥daya Bon, one of the European emissaries. Shortly thereafter, on January 1, 1937, Bhaktisiddhānta passed away at the age of 63.

He did not appoint a successor for his movement, but wished his institution to continue on the basis of merit, and let those who were qualified to be natural leaders. However, after a deep post-charismatic crises that involved court cases from 1937 till 1948, the movement split in two. It picked up momentum slowly in the 1960's, as Svāmī A. C. Bhaktivedānta, a disciple of Bhaktisiddhānta, founded ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness in 1966 in New York. ISKCON was modelled after the Gauḍīya Maṭh and diffused Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in a global scale. Today Bhaktisiddhānta's movement counts over 30 entirely separate institutions with hundreds of centres across the world (Paramadvaiti 1999). An umbrella organization was formed in 1994, the World Vaiṣṇava Association.¹⁹

Analysis and Conclusion

Bhaktisiddhānta's personal sense of Vaiṣṇava identity was, to a degree, deeply embedded in the history, society and cultural climate of 19th and early 20th century India—an epoch in which universalism had become a popular notion, fuelled by the ideals of the European Enlightenment (Valpey 2006: 110). Within the framework of this modernistic milieu, Bhaktisiddhānta came to translate the understandings of traditional Vaiṣṇavism into a contemporary form of spirituality, with the aim of addressing the deep existential concerns of his time.

Yet, notwithstanding modernism's apparent influence, Bhaktisiddhānta's primary sense of self was informed by the distinction drawn in Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism between body, mind

and soul. This understanding postulates that while there may be various social and cultural identities pertaining to the body and mind, there remains an essential, underlying identity that is permanent and beyond the temporary influences of the phenomenal world. Because the identities of body and mind must come and go with the inexorable passing of time, they are considered subordinate to the identity of the essential self, the complete discovery of which is said to be found in relation to Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa: i.e., the masculine and feminine aspects of the Deity that together constitute the ultimate truth in Caitanya Vaiṣṇava theology.


For the monistic Neo-Vedāntism of Vivekananda, the absolute was devoid of form and personality, and mankind's ordinary sense of personal identity was an illusion to be overcome. In almost diametric contrast, Bhaktisiddhānta's Vaiṣṇavism extolled the reality of the form, personality and pastimes of the absolute, and viewed personal identity as the ultimate principle of existence for all living beings. His movement thus sought to enlighten the individual as to her loving relationship with a personal Divine being, convinced that the cultivation of this relationship would lead to the full flowering of the generalized capacity to love. In other words, individual personal identity was seen as more than a mere discardable tool to be jettisoned in the act of attaining enlightenment; it was seen as the fundamental nature of being, the realization of which was enlightenment's goal.

From his earliest years to the final moments of his life, Bhaktisiddhānta remained a person of high virtue, discriminating intellect, firm determination and deep conviction. These various attributes, however, do not in and of themselves establish that Bhaktisiddhānta's life is of historical import and thus worthy of serious biographical interest. It is only in appraising the significance and effect of his accomplishments—i.e., the employment of his attributes—that such a determination can be made. The question is: what exactly did Bhaktisiddhānta contribute, and why is his contribution important enough to warrant our attention? The following point by point assessment represents a succinct attempt to answer this question:

1. At a time when India's most popular social, political and intellectual trends conflicted with much that was represented in Bhaktisiddhānta's tradition, he nonetheless succeeded in reforming, revitalizing and contemporizing the identity, understandings and practices of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism such that they became of interest to the modern mind; in other words, he succeeded in popularizing his perspective despite the fact that it had been considered very much out of step with the prevailing currents of his time: i.e., anti-traditionalism, nationalism, mundane social activism and monism.
2. Bhaktisiddhānta, by an audacious act of self-initiation, became the first Caitanya Vaiṣṇava in 400 years to accept the renounced order of *sannyāsa*, at a time when Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism had fallen into severe disrepute among the *bhadraloka*, being widely viewed as a movement of uneducated opportunists involved in questionable sexual practices. By thus adopting the highly regarded dress and staff of a *sannyāsa*, and by exemplifying a high standard of moral conduct throughout his life, Bhaktisiddhānta helped to restore Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism's tarnished public image and identity. This is one among a number of other factors that enabled him to attract serious, educated followers.
3. At a time when few Indian religious institutions were utilizing modern means to expand their missions, Bhaktisiddhānta established an effective publishing and printing operation, introduced several steady periodicals, wrote hundreds of articles and over

thirty volumes of books, and created a systematic means of distribution; in other words, by introducing modern methods of publishing, printing, transporting and distributing, Bhaktisiddhānta managed to rapidly expose thousands of persons—including important patrons, scholars and dignitaries—to his teachings and his cause.

4. In less than two decades—between the years 1918 and 1936—Bhaktisiddhānta had founded a highly influential pan-Indian institution consisting of sixty-four temples and centers, had attracted thousands of supporters and followers, and had initiated a core group of Vaiṣṇava *sannyāsis* that formed the leadership of his institution, facilitated the expansion of his mission, and eventually carried his teachings into the future.

5. Among Bhaktisiddhānta's accomplishments, however, there is one that retrospectively appears to have outstripped the rest. Curiously, it involved nothing more tangible than an insight, but one that would have far-reaching consequences: the recognition that the Western mind would be receptive to the teachings of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism and capable of spreading those teachings to other parts of the world. Years after Bhaktisiddhānta had passed away, this insight was confirmed by one of his disciples, Svāmī Bhaktivedānta, who made Caitanya Vaisnavism widely known to the Western world, opening the way for others. 

Robert Schreiter has suggested that tradition is a cumulative process involving the gradual development of *credibility*, *intelligibility*, *authority*, *affirmation* and *renewal* (Schreiter 1992: 107-108). Conceiving Bhaktisiddhānta's accomplishments as a contribution to his tradition, they can be further understood in terms of the above criteria as follows: by adopting the robes and asceticism of a renunciate, Bhaktisiddhānta tempered cultural concerns regarding Caitanya Vaiṣṇava morality, thereby helping to repair his tradition's *credibility*; by producing numerous texts and periodicals, many of which addressed relevant contemporary issues, he made Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism accessible to the modern mind, thereby helping to heighten his tradition's *intelligibility*; by arguing for merit over and above either hereditary succession or ritual initiation, and proposing the genuinely enlightened guru as the foremost embodiment of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, he helped to elevate his tradition's structure of *authority*; and, by taking advantage of the technical, scientific and organizational innovations of the 20th century so as to maintain Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism's competitiveness, he helped preserve his tradition in a dynamic process of *affirmation* and *renewal*.

Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura began his Vaiṣṇava revival with the vision of a movement that would have a powerful global effect. However, the fulfillment of that vision first required the development of a sophisticated organizational and intellectual structure. The work of developing that structure was left to Bhaktisiddhānta and eventually became the Gaudiya Math. Bhaktisiddhānta understood as well that the proper development of Vaiṣṇava self-identity would be greatly facilitated by the establishment of a stabilized societal environment; to this end, he considered it part of his mission to redress the inconsistencies of India's caste system, and to rectify, strengthen and modernize his own tradition as well. This entailed the rejection of hereditary hierarchies on the one hand, and alleged syncretized practices on the other, especially those involving *sahaja* erotic tantrism. He aspired for a "pure" form of Vaiṣṇavism, untainted by the corrupting influences of nepotism, sexual exploitation and other vested interests. As might be expected, these determined aims placed Bhaktisiddhānta very much at odds with both the orthodox and the unorthodox Vaiṣṇava communities in Bengal, and the bitter conflicts that ensued taxed his energies during the last phase of his life.

How best to conclude our assessment of the historical significance of Bhaktisiddhānta's contribution—which, in the long run, appears to have won the day over many of his opponents, at least in terms of its eventual worldwide impact? On the one hand, he was able to develop a modern spiritual vision that was somehow in tune with twentieth century Western ideals such as progress, rationality, egalitarianism and universalism; on the other hand, he was deeply committed to the philosophical, theological and devotional precepts of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, and strove always to preserve this perspective and represent it to others. How can we make sense of these two apparently contradictory leanings?

In answering this question, we would argue that Bhaktisiddhānta's inclinations are only superficially at odds, and that he derived most of his ideals, understandings and inspirations from one basic source: the 15th century teachings of Caitanya. This becomes clear when we encounter those medieval teachings as interpreted and understood in Bhaktisiddhānta's writings. For it is in this encounter that we discover striking similarities between certain of Caitanya's understandings and those espoused by the modern West—and also a similar critique concerning the inconsistencies of India's caste system.

Thus in his prolonged confrontation with the *smārta* brāhmaṇa community, in his critique of *sahaja* Vaisnava sects, in his rejection of the hereditary caste system, in his understanding of the fundamental equality of all living beings, and in his selection of the social, intellectual and spiritual principles that would guide his institution, Bhaktisiddhānta considered that he was following the classical interpretation of Caitanya's teachings. In other words, while Bhaktisiddhānta may have displayed an attraction for Western ideals such as rationality, egalitarianism and universalism, that attraction was based on the fact that they resonated well with his own Caitanya Vaisnava sensibilities, and were in keeping with what he viewed as the fundamental understandings enunciated by Caitanya.

An interesting feature in all of this is that the 20th century interpretation of an indigenous 15th century Vaiṣṇava tradition was made to be more compatible with Western modernity than it was with what had represented itself as Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in Bhaktisiddhānta's time. Perhaps this helps to explain why a significant number of 20th and 21st century Westerners seem to have found Bhaktisiddhānta's rendering of Caitanya Vaisnavism so appealing.

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² Hereafter "Bhaktisiddhānta". (Note: Bengali words and names are generally spelled in their Sanskritized style, unless an oral or English form is more in use. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated).

³ One exception is Sambidananda (1935), a source that will be referred to at a later point in this article.

⁴ The most comprehensive collection of Bhaktisiddhānta's writings is found at the Caitanya Institute Library, Rasbihari Avenue 72, Kolkata, India. Selected material in Bengali, Sanskrit and English is also available at the National Library, Kolkata. Outside India, titles are available at the British Library, the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the Library of Congress.

⁵ Cakravarti suggests that "The Gauḍīya Mission had ostensibly no social aim. It did not pretend that it was an organization with a social mission. But it set up schools, libraries, research centres and free hospitals. These, however, had only secondary importance. Its primary object was to preach mysticism" (1985: 398).

⁶ Zavos argues that "the state projected a specific image of organization as a cultural language in its attempt to exert discursive dominance in India. Organization was expressed here as a discourse of modernity" (2000: 2). This colonial ideology had a profound impact on the Hindu response to colonial hegemonic rule, and may have even stimulated the emergence of institutions and organizations such as the Gauḍīya Maṭh.

⁷ There is no consensus as to the precise definition of the term "modernity" since it has different connotations in connection with different regional contexts. A working definition has been offered by David Smith as follows:

“Modernity is the Enlightenment project, with its uncertainties of reason and progress; it is the detraditionalizing of the traditions which preceeded it” (Smith 2003: 7).

⁸ According to Chakravarti: “In many satires of the nineteenth century, villains, drunkards and libertines were depicted as Vaiṣṇavas. These satires reflected the waning of the Vaiṣṇava influence in the middle class urban milieu” (1985: 439).

⁹ Unless otherwise mentioned, the following sketch is based on “Ācārya Carita”, a biographical article that appeared in the January 16, 1937 issue of *Gauṛīya*, the official weekly magazine of Bhaktisiddhānta’s Gaudīya Maṭh (15.23-24, pp. 9-40). An English translation of this and later biographical articles appearing in the *Gauṛīya* is found in Bhakti Shrirup (1974: 1-37). The issue appeared just a few days after Sarasvatī had passed away. Sarasvatī’s later years were minutely documented in the periodicals he published from 1922 onwards. Although an autobiography is consistently mentioned in a number of Gaudīya Maṭh publications (possibly the best available source), I have thus far been unable to uncover a copy. There are, nonetheless, many hagiographic accounts, of which the earliest, and perhaps the most reliable, is the *Sarasvatī Jaya Śrī* (Vidyāvinoda: 2002 [1934]). The book consists of a collection of memories by close disciples that covers the period from 1911 to 1925. Edited by Sundarānanda Vidyāvinoda, one of Bhaktisiddhānta’s closer secretaries, it was offered to him in 1934 as a token of appreciation on his sixtieth birthday. I have also made use of the second unpublished volume of a Ph.D. thesis by Sambidananda das (1935), a disciple who studied at the University of London. Being a member of the Gaudīya Maṭh during Bhaktisiddhānta’s time, Sambidananda had a good many personal experiences to draw from in the creation of his biographical sketch. His two volume thesis was accepted with the title *The History and Literature of the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavas and Their Relation to Other Medieval Vaiṣṇava Schools* (the index was quoted in *The Harmonist or Sree Sajjanatoshani*, 1935: 496-498, 31.21.). It deals with the history of Vaiṣṇavism from the medieval to the modern period. It is here relevant to note that the thirteenth chapter is titled, “The Modern Movement”, and provides a critical study of the contributions of Bhaktivinoda and Bhaktisiddhānta, as well as a brief study of the Gaudīya Maṭh.

¹⁰ The house where Sarasvatī was born was acquired in 1974 by Svāmī Bhakti Daitya Madhava and is today a Gaudīya Maṭh temple. See Tirtha (2001: 232).

¹¹ “Jagannātha” means “the Lord of the universe.” The Deity of Jagannātha is worshipped by Caitanya Vaiṣṇavas as a manifestation of Kṛṣṇa, together with his brother Balarāma and his sister Subhadrā.

¹² The children of Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura and Bhāgavatī Devī were, according to Shukavak Das: “1) Annada Prasad, son, born 1860; 2) Saudamani, daughter, b. 1864; 3) Kadambani, daughter, b. 1867; 4) son died early, b. 1868; 5) Radhika Prasad, son, b. 1870; 6) Kamala Prasad, son, b. 1872; 7) Bimala Prasad, son, 1874; 8) Barada Prasad, son, 1877; 9) Biraja, daughter, b. 1878; 10) Lalita Prasad, son, b. 1880; 11) Krishna Vinodani, daughter, b. 1884; 12) Shyam Sarojini, daughter, b. 1886; 13) Hari pramodini, daughter, b. 1888; and, 14) Shailaja Prasad, son, b. 1891”. All together there were eight boys and six girls (Shukavak 1999: 300). For a history of Bhaktivinoda’s Datta (Dutt) clan and *kayastha* caste, see Hopkins (1986).

¹³ Bhaktivinoda was born into a wealthy family that gradually lost its assets and was plunged into a state of destitution. He received an excellent education in Calcutta and gradually succeeded in finding employment as a tax collector and magistrate in the colonial civil service. His autobiography, *Svalikhita-jivani* (Datta: 1916), provides a detailed description of his long ascent to the higher ranks of the colonial administration.

¹⁴ On April 9, 1935, less than a year before he passed away, Bhaktisiddhānta wrote a letter to a disciple providing a brief autobiographical sketch of his life. Although in popular editions of Bhaktisiddhānta’s letters the name of this disciple is withheld, it is safe to assume that since the questions were posed from England, the disciple was Sambidananda das, who, at the time, was completing his Ph.D dissertation at the University of London. In confirmation of this assumption, it appears that Sambidananda personally acknowledged receipt of such a letter as follows: “He has kindly supplied us with a very short account of his early years at our request” and quotes from the same letter as well (Sambidananda 1935: 13.32).

¹⁵ “Hill Tipperah or Tripura”, article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1911), vol. 13, p. 469.

¹⁶ The verse is quoted in *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* by Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja, Madhya 13.75; translation by Stewart & Dimock (1999: 522).

¹⁷ *Varṇaśrāma* refers to four divisions of labor (*varṇa*) and four divisions of civil status (*aśrama*).

¹⁸ “A Protest Meeting”, *Amṛita Bazar Patrika*, September 6, 1931, p. 11.

¹⁹ The association has a webpage at www.wva-vvrs.org. News of its activities can be read at www.vina.cc, accessed on April 1, 2007.